

Dear LEGISLATIVE PROGRAM REVIEW and INVESTIGATIONS COMMITTEE,

The Friends of Harkness Memorial State Park in Waterford, CT appreciates the opportunity to raise your awareness of the current situation of our state forest and park system.

Friends of Harkness organized in 1992 due to the "Demolition by Neglect" specifically of the Harkness Mansion and the rest of the park in general by the administration in power at the time. Since that time we have been successful in lobbying the Legislature to approve funding to restore the mansion to its former glory after being bequeathed to the state of CT for the well-being of its citizens by Edward & Mary Stillman Harkness, in 1950.

Our volunteers provide public services such as providing tours of the Harkness mansion throughout the summer and assisting park staff in maintaining 6 public gardens. We raise funds with plant sales and gift shop operations. We raise awareness of the value of state parks with a Family Day celebration attended by thousands of visitors on one Saturday in September. Also, a public-private partnership with CT DEEP to restore and maintain buildings, gardens, and open spaces of Harkness has flourished into its third decade of mutual commitment.

To our credit, 23 Friends of CT State Parks Groups across the state have been attempting to bridge the gap between dangerously low staffing levels, unrealistic operations budgets, and facilities in disrepair. However, volunteers cannot provide the safety, protection, cleanliness, and comfort that adequate professional staff can.

Each year for the past several years, the 23 Groups hold a CT State Parks Day in the Concourse at the Capitol to raise awareness, showcase all the volunteer groups' efforts, and lobby for adequate and realistic funding for our state forest and park system. Yet each year we find ourselves fighting against continued cuts to staffing, operational budgets, and deferred maintenance of facilities due to lack of funding.

You will hear that \$ 1 Billion dollars & 9,000 jobs annually are added to the state of CT's economy by the state forest and park system. A system this beneficial must be strengthened, not chronically weakened. With adequate and realistic funding for our state system, local and regional economies will dramatically improve, the value of the tourism network increases, and the state forest and park system will add even more than the \$ 1 Billion annually it already does.

Thank you for choosing to study the conditions and situations in our parks and forests. We know that you will soon find out how dire the conditions are and how dangerous the situation is becoming.

Chris Callahan, President of Friends of Harkness Memorial State Park

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